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**HOME NEWS SNAPSHOT**

## Hear them roar

**BY VICTORIA DAVIS**

FEBRUARY 7, 2019



VICTORIA DAVIS

**Les Cougars' oldest troupe member, 63-year-old Rita Witter, strikes a cougar pose over her guitar during a rehearsal.**

At her eclectic, bohemian-styled apartment in downtown Madison, Tulin Waters, or “La Bomba,” sits with cocktail in hand with the women she refers to as her “cougar sisters.”

“These girls are my family,” says Waters, the creator and director of Madison’s caburlesque troupe, Les Cougars. “They’ve become who I count on for literally everything.”

“We ain’t girls no more,” adds 37-year-old Lili Luxe, who has been a burlesque dancer for Les Cougars since the troupe’s first show in 2014.

“I know, but we’re girls at heart,” says Waters, age 43.

Luxe is lounging on Waters’ living room couch with the troupe’s comedian Vanessa Tortolano; blues singer Blythe Gamble sits on the opposite loveseat. Since Waters moved in September, the women have been using her new place as their “cougar den” to discuss details for their first show of the year, happening on Valentine’s Day at the High Noon Saloon.

“We’re really going all out with this show because it’s our fifth anniversary,” says Waters. “We’re making this an experience from the moment you walk in, all the way up until the time you leave.”

“If we get glitter on them, that experience will stay with them for weeks,” adds Gamble, known on stage as Ally Cat. Waters calls her the group’s “Blues Mama.”

The show, which Waters and her cougars put on every year, is more of a variety spectacle than a burlesque performance. The two-hour show includes aerialist entertainment, music, stand-up, pole dancing, duets and a lingerie contest. Despite the troupe’s name, Waters says the purpose of the group is not to “wrap ourselves around a younger man. Although some of us have had that...”

Gamble and Tortolano raise their hands, “Guilty!”

There's a higher purpose: "It's that we're over 35 and proud of it," says Waters.

Les Cougars wants to put women over 35 in the entertainment spotlight and demonstrate that as they age, their confidence on stage — or around a pole — should grow stronger. "The beautiful thing about aging is becoming unapologetic for what you have," Waters says.

"Here are my stretch marks, here are my double Ds that are down to my belly button," she adds. "Not everybody wants to see it or has to see it, but I think we need to be out there saying, if a 25-year-old woman can shake it, and display it and be proud of their expertise on stage, so should we. So here it is, and kiss my ass."

"Hell yeah," says Luxe, lifting up her pink drink in a toast. "A lot of us are moms but we're still putting that sexiness out there and owning ourselves."

Waters formed the group with 11 women; now there are 17 members.

At Les Cougars' first rehearsal on Monday, Luxe — dressed in a commanding, bright red ringmaster coat and black leather tights — practices her dominatrix stance as she cracks her whip. Gamble, true to burlesque form, is dressed in classic black fishnets, while Waters wears her stage costume that is part queen of hearts, part cabaret bunny.

"My specialty is comedy caburlesque," Waters says. "So during the show I'll be pulling everything from candy to air fresheners, even ham sandwiches, out of my, well, you know."

Dressed in sequins, stilettos and strappy lingerie, more of the cougar clan's musicians and dancers take to the blue-lighted stage, getting in character for their numbers. The one male in the show, nicknamed "Baby Bear," will play cupid for a third year, dressed in adult diapers and wings while shooting condoms into the audience.

"I don't want women to disappear or settle just because they've reached a certain age," Waters says. "You should actually put yourself out there more because you should know yourself better by now ... We're here to celebrate women who are still kicking ass every day."

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**Blythe Gamble and her band, the Rollin' Dice:** Won the Madison Area Music Association's 2018 award for the best blues song, "Feel So Much Better."

**Gamble:** "I call myself a baby tiger because my guy is nine years younger."

**Vanessa Tortolano:** Founding member of Madison's NessAlla Kombucha and performs standup comedy in New York City.

**Lili Luxe:** A leader of the [Nipple Equality event](#) in Madison every year.

**[Les Cougars Valentine's Day Burlesque and Cabaret](#) show:** High Noon Saloon at 7 p.m., Feb. 14; tickets are \$10

*[Editor's note: This article has been updated to correct a quote from Waters.]*

**SNAPSHOT**

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Annual Valentine's Day cabaret/burlesque show. \$10 (\$8 adv.).  
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